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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes the Model Observation Kindergarten and First Grade whose approach is based on the philosophy that education should be centered in the learner, that children learn at different rates and that children learn something only when they are ready. Many aspects of The British Infant Schools are incorporated in the program. Sources of more detailed information are provided for this program, specifically, and for Model Programs Childhood Education, in general. (Author/NH)

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Model Programs

Childhood Education

Model Observation Kindergarten and First Grade

Amherst, Massachusetts

Model classrooms which offer completely individualized scheduling for mixed age groups of kindergarten and first-grade students

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
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Office of Education
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OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
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FOREWORD

This booklet is one of 34 in a series of promising programs on childhood education prepared for the White House Conference on Children, December 1970. The series was written under contract by the American Institutes for Research for the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Office of Child Development and the Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Within the broad area of childhood education the series includes descriptions of programs on reading and language development, the disadvantaged, preschool education, and special education. In describing a program, each booklet provides details about the purpose; the children reached; specific materials, facilities, and staff involved; and other special features such as community services, parental involvement, and finances. Sources of further information on the programs are also provided.

"Welcome to a happy classroom!" reads the sign on the door of a combined kindergarten and first-grade room at the Marks Meadow School in Amherst, Mass. A visitor to this classroom soon discovers that the description is an accurate one--the room is the "home" of happy teachers, children, and pets. One hundred children are participating in a program designed to utilize aspects of the British infant school approach and progressive methods from American early childhood programs. The results of the program for children have been evident to over 1,000 observers a year from all over the State in the specially designed observation corridors overlooking the classrooms. Children are active, purposeful, and busy as they pursue activities of their own choosing. They soon discover that learning is exciting and fun. The classrooms have served as not only a model of a kindergarten program, but also a training ground for interns from the nearby University of Massachusetts School of Education.

DESIGNING A MODEL KINDERGARTEN

When Massachusetts began planning for a statewide program of compulsory kindergarten education, the State designed proposals for model kindergartens to be set up with funds provided under title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The

Amherst schools and Mrs. Kathleen McKay, who directed a summer kindergarten program in Amherst, were asked to help plan the program proposal. One of two model projects funded by title III, the Amherst Model Observation Kindergarten began operation in 1968.

Amherst, a community of about 12,000 people in western Massachusetts, is the site of two colleges--the University of Massachusetts and Amherst College--which add approximately 19,000 more people to the town's population. Although many of the citizens are transient, the town has a tradition of providing good support for the schools and has been receptive to the model project.

The program is located in the Marks Meadow School, which is both the laboratory school of the University of Massachusetts School of Education and one of Amherst's public schools. Three classrooms include approximately 100 children, drawn from those regularly attending the school. Each class has a teacher and a teaching aide. The Marks Meadow School, because of its central location, has a fairly representative cross section of the Amherst population, which is predominantly middle-class and contains many people connected with the University.

In its first 2 years of operation, the Model Observation Kindergarten, under the direction of Mrs. McKay, accommodated over 2,000 visitors. The teachers developed a model kindergarten curriculum which was disseminated throughout the State, and so many copies were requested that the entire printing was soon used up. Videotapes showing the model kindergarten in action were also made available.

NEW DIRECTION

In its third year of operation, the program moved in a new direction. On the basis of experience in the summer kindergarten and the first 2 years of the Model Observation Kindergarten, the teaching staff developed an educational philosophy which rejects the traditional single-year, lock-step, grade division, ability grouping, and teacher-centered approaches, using instead the ungraded approach to a combination kindergarten-first grade. On the basis of their experience with a kindergarten program the staff believes that kindergarten is an important first step in preparing a child for lifelong learning, and that this first step cannot be separated from the entire process, rigidly apportioned to one particular time period in a child's life--the year between ages 5 and 6.

The model program's current approach embodies the philosophy that education is centered in the learner, that children learn at different rates, and that they learn something only when they are ready for it. Learning to read, for instance, cannot be forced simply because the child has reached the age traditionally considered appropriate for reading. Too often the result of this method is that many children, who are not truly ready, experience failure in their first attempt to read, fall behind others, and become remedial readers and chronic failures in a system geared to the "average." Likewise, the gifted child may be bored by the time he is allowed to officially "learn" what he already knows.

The approach at Marks Meadow School seeks to avoid these problems by fostering the child's desire to learn and letting him learn when he is ready. The teaching staff is there to help--to establish an acceptant climate for each child, to group children of mixed ages and abilities together, and to provide an integrated day with no set subject-time periods. In such an environment the child is assured of his own self-worth, is among other children at a similar stage of learning development, and is free to pursue his own interests and discoveries without time limits.

INFLUENCE OF THE FREE DAY

The Amherst project is one of the pioneer American public programs in trying to incorporate advances made by British schools. The Marks Meadow teachers found themselves moving closer and closer to many of the practices of the British infant schools, with their "free day" scheduling of the curriculum depending on the child's interest span for each activity. Therefore, all the teachers, together with the program director Mrs. McKay, traveled to England to participate in an intensive summer workshop which involved teaching in British schools. Upon returning to Marks Meadow, they evolved their own curriculum, incorporating what they found to be most effective from the British system.

The curriculum is divided into five broad categories in which the child works daily--mathematics, scientific observation, creative arts, writing, and reading in all subject areas. Within these categories, however, the child is always free to apportion his time according to his own interest. This flexible schedule reflects the teachers' conviction that children should be free to learn about what interests them, for as long as it interests them. Mrs. McKay says, "We contribute to the short attention span of our children by continually saying when they're involved with something, 'Put that away now; it's time for this.'"

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A COLORFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The Amherst teachers put the schedule in the student's hands, providing the environment which enables him to assume this responsibility. The areas of the room are designed around different activities and color-coded to the types of activities. On a centrally located board are name cards for all the children, each name with a hook beside it on which the child hangs a colored tag when he completes an activity in the area of that color. A sign in one classroom summarizes the color-coded activity areas:

Every day we

1. Draw and write in our notebooks (blue)
2. Learn by observing (orange)
3. Create something fine (yellow)
4. Enjoy math (green) weighing counting measuring cooking
5. Read - stories or pictures, games, ABC's (red)

There are no high walls between classroom areas, and a child need never feel isolated when working alone in an area. The walls in a typical classroom are covered with children's drawings, paintings, and cutouts; the shelves and tables exhibit sculpture, models, and objects collected on field trips. Clement the rabbit hops freely about the room, which also harbors gerbils, fish, and guinea pigs. The children care for the animals and for the many seedlings and plants growing in the room, at the same time learning, discussing, and recording their observations. Such activities come under the color orange, as does the observing done on the many field trips taken outside the school to such places as the nature preserve or the University of Massachusetts farm.

MATERIALS FOR LEARNING

The areas contain many materials for manipulative activities which foster the growth of mathematical, scientific, and language concepts. In the green math area are balances, scales, and a variety of objects for weighing; a portable oven, hot plate, sink area, and kitchen supplies for cooking; and large and small objects for measuring and counting. One highly successful activity with both boys and girls is making jello--a math lesson that's good to eat! Another way of making mathematics more concrete for

children involves graphing. Students make many graphs, working both individually and in small groups. They may interview their classmates to find out how many brothers and sisters each has and then graph the results; they may make graphs showing the number of blocks there are in various structures they build.

The red reading area contains stories, pictures, alphabet letters, games, and many teacher-made materials, such as a box of cards with directions to follow: "Trace your name in pencil; trace your name in crayon; tell a story about someone with this name; draw a picture for your story." There is also a record player with multiple sets of earphones so that children may listen individually or in small groups.

ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Children use clay, paints, blocks, crayons, or other materials to create things, using their own ideas and recent experiences in or out of school. Also, they generally draw and write in their notebooks every day. When they go to their cubbies each day they may find a card with a suggestion from the teacher. These cards may provide direction in choosing activities at the beginning of the day, offer help or reinforcement in areas where it is needed,

and furnish material for notebook entries. Through the cards the teacher can help channel children's activities toward areas of greatest need or interest. For instance, a boy who was particularly interested in baseball might receive a card with the instruction: "Write about who will win the World Series."

Children draw many large, colorful pictures and practice writing letters and numbers in their notebooks. Frequently, the teacher writes in a notebook a sentence which the child has dictated, and the child copies it in his own writing. Students' notebooks are periodically reviewed by the teacher, who writes encouraging comments and points out the child's areas of strength so that he can capitalize upon them.

WORKING INDEPENDENTLY AND TOGETHER

Within the different areas of the room children work individually, in small groups, and sometimes in large groups. Manipulative materials are always available for individual use; however, many--such as blocks, cuisenaire rods, and games--are often used by two children working together. Small-group activities may be initiated with the teacher's help and carried to completion by the children themselves, as was done in the planting of acorns.

A wall chart proclaims, "We planted acorns, seven acorns because there were seven children; now we watch them grow like this...." On the chart are recorded the group's observation about how the acorns grew, and below, on a shelf, are seven green seedlings. Working and playing together in this way also helps children grow in social relationships.

Another activity often done by a small group is setting out and cleaning up after the daily snack. Snack time, however, is also an independent activity--cookies and juice are available all morning, and children are free to eat their snack when they are hungry.

A large-group activity may involve the children and teacher sitting on the floor, singing a riddle song. Such gatherings are often a followup to a period of independent work, and the teacher may inquire of several children, "Jane, what did you do in math today that was new and different?" or "Karen, what new words did you learn in reading?" Children can thus share their activities and learn about other activities to try.

Although the environment at Marks Meadow is structured to encourage the child to learn and to want to learn more, the emphasis is on letting him develop his potential at his own pace. Teachers feel that they have to be more patient, to wait for the child to be ready; they do not insist that a child begin to read at a certain age or in a certain way. They feel that there are many other roads to learning besides reading and, if a child is not reading by age 6, it does not mean that his learning is retarded. The currently widespread practice of ability grouping, which often begins with high, middle, and low reading groups, is seen as divisive and destructive. The teachers try to avoid labeling nonreaders and glorifying reading as the only route to knowledge. Learning achievements of all kinds, including reading, are encouraged and rewarded by warm praise.

Most important, however, the learning activities are rewarding in themselves; and the child, in pursuing those which give him satisfaction, will eventually reach what Mrs. McKay terms "the golden moment of readiness." When he is ready to begin reading, the child may choose his own route. He may select a traditional preprimer; he may pursue a language experience approach, dictating his own stories and reading the written results; he may make

his own books. It is interesting to note, the director of the program points out, that not one boy has chosen the preprimer route, although girls frequently do.

CHANGING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

In this program, the teacher is no longer the central figure directing all work and play, yet she must still be aware of the needs, activities, and progress of each child and of his relationships with those around him. Planning, observing, encouraging, and evaluating, she is directly involved with the children and their world; her teaching aide helps with these duties. Each teacher-and-aide team works in a classroom with approximately 25 children--about eighteen 6-year-olds, who come for a full day, and eight or nine 5-year-olds who come in the morning or the afternoon only.

COOPERATIVE PLANNING, TEACHING, AND TRAINING

Teachers work together in planning and usually have team meetings once a week. Other teachers in the school, such as the art and music teachers, serve as consultants to help plan activities and arrange the areas of the room which are related to their fields.

University involvement is also evident. Student interns from the University of Massachusetts may be present in the classroom; or, for example, the man from the university farm may bring in two newborn lambs. The university provides inservice training for aides, interns, and teachers. And through the university and the State, the program serves as a model for observation, thus contributing to training and planning in other districts.

Cooperation between the school and parents is important to the program. To help parents understand the new approach, several open house sessions and parent nights are held each year. The staff invites parents in small groups to view the classes from the observation corridor and to discuss the program and their children's activities.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

Since children are not expected to achieve the same results at the same pace, and since the most important things which the program tries to instill in children are not measured by presently available objective means, standard methods of evaluating and reporting children's progress are not generally used. There are no periodic written tests, nor are children given letter grades

and report cards. Instead, informal written evaluations tell the parents of their children's progress.

Program personnel are developing a series of evaluation sheets on which observations of behavior can be recorded. They hope to break down their basic objectives into measurable components and have many observers methodically and regularly observe the children's progress. They stress, however, that their evaluations are intended to describe the pupil's development and to help the teacher work more effectively with him; they are not meant to establish norms or comparative ratings. For long-range evaluation of the overall experiment, pre- and posttests are being given, including the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test required by the State, the Frostig Test of Visual Perception, and the De Hirsch Reading Test.

A BUDGET FOR RESTRUCTURING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

In comparison with the costs of setting up any kindergarten program, Amherst educators found that their model kindergarten was not expensive. The director estimates the cost of manipulative materials at about $1,500 per classroom, with other expenses raising the cost to between $2,500 and $3,000 per class for the

kindergarten, and approximately $500 more for the combined kindergarten and first-grade program. There is no expenditure for desks because each child has his own cubby instead. The extensive use of teacher-made materials also helps to cut costs. The town of Amherst is taking over more of the cost each year, expecting to support the program completely when title III funds terminate at the end of the third year.

Plans for modification and improvement of the program are continually underway. This year the staff plans to enroll kindergarten children as they reach age 5, thus staggering the introduction of new students into the classes. The staff also hopes that the ungraded approach will be implemented throughout the Marks Meadow School.

Further information about the Amherst Model Observation Kindergarten and First Grade may be obtained from:

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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MODEL PROGRAMS--Childhood Education

This is one in a series of 34 descriptive booklets on childhood education programs prepared for the White House Conference on Children, December 1970. Following is a list of the programs and their locations:

The Day Nursery Assn. of Cleveland, Ohio
Neighborhood House Child Care Services, Seattle, Wash.
Behavior Analysis Model of a Follow Through Program, Oraibi, Ariz.
Cross-Cultural Family Center, San Francisco, Calif.
NRO Migrant Child Development Center, Pasco, Wash.
Bilingual Early Childhood Program, San Antonio, Tex.
Santa Monica Children's Centers, Calif.
Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction, Salt Lake City, Utah
Dubnoff School for Educational Therapy, North Hollywood, Calif.
Demonstration Nursery Center for Infants and Toddlers, Greensboro, N.C.
Responsive Environment Model of a Follow Through Program, Goldsboro, N.C.
Center for Early Development and Education, Little Rock, Ark.
DOVACK, Monticello, Fla.
Perceptual Development Center Program, Natchez, Miss.
Appalachia Preschool Education Program, Charleston, W. Va.
Foster Grandparent Program, Nashville, Tenn.
Hartford Early Childhood Program, Conn.
Philadelphia Teacher Center, Pa.
Cognitively Oriented Curriculum, Ypsilanti, Mich.
Mothers' Training Program, Urbana, Ill.
The Micro-Social Preschool Learning System, Vineland, N.J.
Project PLAN, Parkersburg, W. Va.
Interdependent Learner Model of a Follow Through Program, New York, N.Y.
San Jose Police Youth Protection Unit, Calif.
Model Observation Kindergarten, Amherst, Mass.
Boston Public Schools Learning Laboratories, Mass.
Martin Luther King Family Center, Chicago, Ill.
Behavior Principles Structural Model of a Follow Through Program, Dayton, Ohio
University of Hawaii Preschool Language Curriculum, Honolulu, Hawaii
Springfield Avenue Community School, Newark, N.J.
Corrective Reading Program, Wichita, Kans.
New Schools Exchange, Santa Barbara, Calif.
Tacoma Public Schools Early Childhood Program, Wash.
Community Cooperative Nursery School, Menlo Park, Calif.